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PHONEME PROBLEMS

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I am becoming disillusioned with some phoneme hunting. The Chrau long vowels are good well-behaved phonemes, with just an occasional well-defined neutralization. But the attempt to pin down and identify Chrau short vowels is frustrating.

Phonemes, morphophonemes, ~~features~~, prosodies, etc., all have the same characteristic that they demand same/different, or yes/no, or all/nothing decisions. But since 1959 the Chrau short vowels have been laughing at me as they watch me try to identify them, as they melt into each other, trade names, change their faces, and slip out of my grasp just as I am laying my hands on them.

If the Chrau informants themselves cannot make up their minds whether two sounds in identical or similar environments are the same or different, how can a simple-minded linguist like me be expected to be able to call them the same or different?

As a speaker of English, it does not make the slightest bit of difference to me whether to and too are the same sounds or different; as long as to doesn't sound like from there is no problem in communication.

A same/different decision is called for only when the two words could equally well occur in the same context. When two words do not occur in the same context but are clearly phonetically identical, there is generally no hesitation at calling them phonemically the same. When they do not occur in the same context but are clearly different phonetically, there is no hesitation at calling them phonemically different. But when they do not occur in the same context and are not clearly identical or different, phonemic analysis gets very sticky. Polysystemism isn't the answer, either, because it too demands same/different decisions. And when such problems are solved, as I suspect they often are, simply by fiat, there remains a nagging feeling that one has fudged and has not really described the language as it actually is.

Phonemes are pronunciation habits, and habits may be of different degrees of fixity or differentiation. Well-at-tested phonemes are fixed habits, fuzzy phonemes are fuzzy habits. Discussion in terms of the functional load of a phoneme is possibly a step in the right direction, but more important perhaps is a discussion of phonetic consistency (i.e. the fixity of the habit). Maybe this would help to describe the Chrau short un-phonemes.